

The Pharaohs of the Exodus

There are two major views for the date of the exodus; the early date of 1446 BC and the late date of around 1225 BC. Though one cannot be completely sure of the date, most biblical scholars hold to the 1446 view. This view is based on dates given in different places in the Bible; the archeology of Egypt and Canaan support it as well.

The Kingdom Periods of Egypt

The following paragraphs on the Egyptian history of this time period will lay a foundation for and help to clarify the two different views of the Exodus.

Middle Kingdom: 2055-1650 BC

It was during the Old Kingdom (2650-2134 BC) that the land of Egypt was unified under a central monarchy and became a wealthy and powerful kingdom. However, the Nile began a series of insufficient flooding, which led to widespread hunger and death. As a result, the government fell into chaos, and the country splintered into a dozen chiefdoms. The kings of the 11th dynasty restored power back to the monarchy, although the local governors still maintained significant power as well. Trade agriculture and writing were revitalized during this period. The 11th and 12th were the main ruling dynasties of the Middle Kingdom.

The 13th dynasty was marked by a significant decline in military power and in large-scale monumental building projects. Due to this decline, the state system collapsed, and Egypt entered a dark period of chaos and disruption once again.

Second Intermediate Period: 1782-1570 BC

As a result of Egypt's decline, a Semitic people called the Hyksos ("rulers of foreign lands"), originating from the northern part of Mesopotamia, invaded Egypt and established themselves as the 14th ruling dynasty. Egyptian records tell of a great invasion of peoples through the Eastern Delta, although in reality these Semitic immigrants had been steadily entering the country for some time and gradually gaining increasing authority in the region.

The Hyksos finally sacked Memphis around 1720, controlling the Northern part of Egypt (and influencing southern Egypt as well). With the Nubians south of Egypt growing in power, the southern, "native Egyptians" were a conquered people.

While the Hyksos kings (14th-16th dynasties) controlled the northern part of the country, "native Egyptian" rulers were establishing the 17th dynasty in Thebes in the south. These Theban kings managed to more or less continue with the culture that had prevailed during the Middle Kingdom period. The last two rulers of this native Egyptian dynasty in Thebes, Seqenenre Tao and his son Kamose, started rebelling against the Hyksos.

New Kingdom: 1570-1070 BC

Ahmose I, the brother of Kamose, led a successful revolt against the Hyksos and drove them completely out of Egypt. Thus Ahmose I was the first ruler of the 18th dynasty and established the New Kingdom as a military empire.

With the expulsion of the Hyksos at the end of the Second Intermediate Period, the Theban Prince Ahmose I now reigned supreme. The Egyptian army pushed beyond the traditional frontiers of Egypt into Syria-Palestine and brought Nubia (Kush) under control. The Theban conquerors had thus established the 18th dynasty, creating a great empire under a succession of powerful rulers. The New Kingdom that Ahmose inaugurated was the period of greatest imperial might in Egypt's long history.

This kingdom lasted during the 18th–20th dynasties. The New Kingdom pharaohs are probably the most well known among all the Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt, including Hatshepsut, the female pharaoh; Rameses the Great; Tutankamun, the boy king; the so-called “heretic” Pharaoh, Akhenaten; and the subsequent short-lived Amarna period.

The Date of the Exodus

Though one cannot be absolutely sure of the date of the exodus of the Israelites, the 1446 BC date of the exodus seems to be the most likely option, considering the biblical and archeological evidence and the fact that there is very little evidence that supports the other view—even though secularists and Hollywood stick to it (as seen in the movies *The Ten Commandments* and *The Prince of Egypt*). However, it must be understood that one of the difficulties in identifying the pharaohs of the exodus is that not only is the Bible vague on these pharaohs, but modern historians cannot agree on the dates and reigns of the Pharaohs and have repeatedly changed their dating system. Therefore, be aware that the dates given in this article may not match those found in other sources. The point of this article is not to definitively identify the pharaohs but to show how the dates of the Bible do work well with the Egyptian history of those dates.

The Latter Around 1225 BC View of the Exodus

The reference to the Hebrews building the city Rameses in Ex. 1:11 has led many scholars to believe that Rameses II (1279-1213 BC) was the Pharaoh of the exodus. However, if Rameses II was the builder in Ex. 1:11, then he would have had to be reigning over Egypt for over 80 years to also be the Pharaoh of the exodus, but neither Rameses nor any other pharaoh in history reigned for that long. We know this because in verse 11 Moses is not yet born, and Moses did not return to Egypt as deliverer until he was 80 years old (Ex. 7:7).

Likewise Ex. 2:23 and 4:18 state that the Pharaoh who oppressed Israel is dead, and there is a new pharaoh when Moses returns to Egypt, which means the Pharaoh of Ex. 1:11 and the pharaoh of the exodus are not the same. Thus those who take this view are not really taking the text seriously. There are possible reasons for the name of the city. First, Rameses II finished the building of the city during his reign and named it after himself, which he was known for doing. Second, the author has updated the name from what it was called during the slavery of the Hebrews to what the audience that he is writing to would have known it as.

The city of Rameses is the only evidence given for the latter date of 1290-1225 for the exodus. This date is, in fact, proven quite unlikely by other Egyptian historical records. Merenptah (1213-1203 BC), the ruler after Rameses II, writes in his own words that Israel was already in the land of Canaan during his reign. On a stone stele¹ that scholars have named the Merenptah

¹ A stele is a stone or wooden slab, generally taller than it is wide. They were erected in the ancient world as funeral markers and boundary markers. They were also used by kings as monuments to their power, listing the accomplishments of their reign. Law codes were also written on steles.

Stele (ca. 1208 BC), he details his conquest of the lands of Libya and Canaan. On it he mentions that Israel was an already-established nation in the land of Canaan by the time he became Pharaoh, and he brags about defeating them in a great battle. It is nearly impossible that the Israelites would have left Egypt as slaves in 1290-1225, wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, and entered Canaan to become a people so established in the land (with a stable government and a powerful military) that by 1208 BC a great pharaoh would brag about defeating them.

The Earlier 1446 BC View of the Exodus

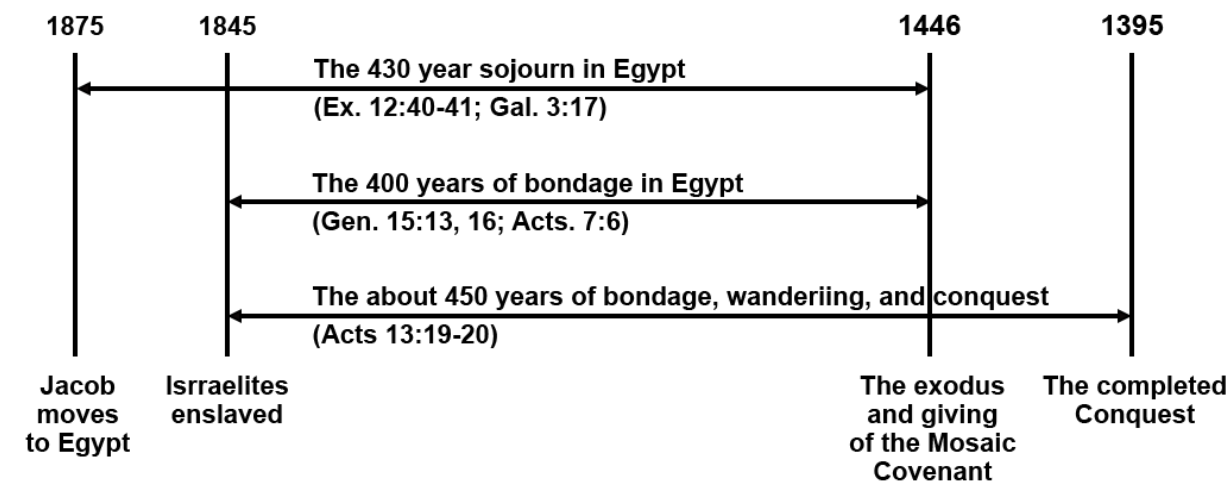
1 Kgs. 6:1 says, “And it came to pass in the four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Zif, which is the second month that he began to build the house of Yahweh.”

One can see that the times for both the exodus and the beginning of the Temple have been specifically stated here. Scholars have identified the fourth year of Solomon’s reign as 966 BC (give or take a year).² Using this 966 BC date, one finds that the exodus took place in 1446 BC, according to 1 Kgs. 1:6. Based on this information, the exodus would have occurred in the third year of the reign of the pharaoh Amenhotep II (the 7th pharaoh of the 18th dynasty).

Second, according to Judg. 11:26, Israel had occupied Canaan for 300 years before the judgeship of Jephthah, which is dated between 1100 and 1050 BC. This dates Joshua’s conquest between 1400 and 1350 BC. Adding Israel’s 40 years in the desert puts the Exodus between 1440 and 1390 BC.

Third, Ex. 2:23 and Acts 7:13 both state that Moses lived in exile in Midian forty years while the pharaoh of the oppression was still alive. The only pharaohs who ruled forty years or more were Thutmose III (1504-1450 BC) and Rameses II (1279-1213 BC). Rameses’ reign has already been shown unlikely, and Thutmose II fits with the 1446 BC view of the exodus. (See below *The of the Pharaohs of the Exodus Listing*.)

References to Israel’s Years in Egypt



² See Gleason Archer. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, 1974, p. 223.

In addition to the biblical references, archeology also affirms the 1446 BC date. John Garstang, who excavated Jericho in the 1930s AD, dated the destruction of Jericho around 1400 BC.³ Jericho was the first city that the Israelites conquered under the leadership of Joshua when they entered the land of Canaan. Adding forty years to Garstang's date (to account for Israel's wandering before entering Canaan) puts the exodus shortly before 1440 BC. Garstang also concluded that the walls of the city toppled outward, which would compare favorably with Josh. 6:20.

The Amarna tablets (ca. 1400 BC) are a collection of over three hundred diplomatic letters that record correspondence between the Pharaoh of Egypt and Egyptian representatives in the land of Canaan. These letters speak of a period of chaos caused by the Habiru—very likely the Hebrews—during the late 1400s BC. This also matches up with Joshua leading the Israelites in a conquest of the land during the late 1400s BC, based on a 1446 BC date of the exodus.

Furthermore, the “Dream Stele” of Thutmose IV (1419-1386 BC), son of Amenhotep II (see below *The Pharaohs of the Exodus Listing* below), states that he was not the legitimate successor to the throne.⁴ According to the “Dream Stele,” the god Har-em-akht promised the throne to Thutmose IV on the condition that he restore the exposure of the Sphinx, which apparently had been covered by sand. This promise implies that Thutmose IV was not Amenhotep II's firstborn son, who would have been the legitimate heir. The firstborn son had evidently died prior to taking the throne of Egypt. This would agree with Ex. 12:29, which says the pharaoh's firstborn son was killed along with all other firstborns during the Passover. Amenhotep II being the pharaoh of the exodus and losing his firstborn son in the plagues matches perfectly with the 1446 BC date of the exodus.

Even though it cannot be concretely proven, one can see that there is ample evidence in archeology and history to believe that the exodus happened in 1446 BC just as the Bible records.

Pharaohs of the Exodus

Scholars who take the numbers and dates in the Bible at face value place the time of Jacob's going down to Egypt in about 1876 BC. Joseph's experience would thus fall in the time prior to the Hyksos control of Egypt (1720-1570 BC). Accordingly, everything in the narrative about Joseph points to a native Egyptian setting, not a Hyksos one. Joseph's death, then, would have been around 1806 BC, just a few years prior to the end of the 12th dynasty of Egypt, which marks the decline of the Middle Kingdom.⁵

It is difficult to identify the “new king” in Ex. 1:8 since the text is vague in how much time is passing in Exodus chapter one. However, the rise of a “new king” must be understood as a new dynasty. In Acts 7:18 when Stephen quotes this passage, he uses the Greek word for “different king,” which means “something that is not like the previous.” The statement “who did not know Joseph” means that this pharaoh has no knowledge of Egyptian history, for it is unlikely that Joseph's act of saving Egypt and the surrounding world from starvation would have gone unrecorded and untaught. This suggests that something of great significance in history has

³ See John Garstang. *The Story of Jericho*, 1948, p. 122.

⁴ See J.B. Pritchard (ed.). *Ancient Near-Eastern Texts*, p. 449.

⁵ See E. H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 49-55.

caused Joseph's acts to be erased and forgotten or that the current Pharaoh did not come from a traditional Egyptian background.

Assuming the traditional date of the exodus this "new king" most likely was a Hyksos ruler. The Hyksos were a blend of Semitic people from the northern part of the Mesopotamia and took over the Egyptian throne from 1720 to 1570 BC. As foreigners they would have had no knowledge of Joseph. This possibility is supported by Isa. 52:4, which refers to the pharaoh that oppressed the Israelites as being an Assyrian, a people group from the northern part of the Mesopotamia. In 1570 BC Ahmose I (1570-1546 BC), a full-blooded Egyptian, led a rebellion against the Hyksos and drove them out of Egypt and took the throne of Egypt. After 150 years of Hyksos rule, it is not likely that Ahmose I would have about known about Joseph either and thus he would have just keep the Hebrews enslaved.

The pharaoh in Ex.1:22 responsible for the genocide of the Hebrew baby boys is most likely Thutmose I (1524-1518 BC), which matches what we know of his character from Egyptian records. Pharaoh's daughter in Ex. 2:5-10 was most likely Hatshepsut (1498-1483 BC), who would later become Pharaoh herself. Her power and influence would explain why Moses had a reasonable amount of security among those of the ruling Egyptian dynasty despite being a Hebrew.

The Pharaoh of Ex. 2:15 was, in all probability, Thutmose III (1504-1450 BC). Thutmose III made it his mission in life to erase all evidence of Hatshepsut's rule from Egypt. Moses' killing of the Egyptian would have given him sufficient reason to get rid of Moses, especially since Hatshepsut raised him, thus eliminating another piece of her reign. Thutmose III reigning for another forty years (Ex. 2:23; Acts 7:30) matches the Egyptian records of the length of his reign, as mentioned above.

This means that the pharaoh who succeeds him, at the end of Moses' 40-year exile, was Amenhotep II (1453-1419 BC), the Pharaoh of the plagues and the exodus. Historical records state that for several years after 1446, Amenhotep II was unable to carry out any invasions or extensive military operations. This would seem to be very strange behavior for a pharaoh who hoped to equal his father's legacy of no less than seventeen military campaigns in nineteen years. But this is exactly what one would expect from a pharaoh who had lost almost all his cavalry, chariots, and army at the Red Sea (Ex. 14:23, 27-30). Notice that Exodus never says that Pharaoh died in the Red Sea.

Likewise, as already mentioned, the "Dream Stele" of Thutmose IV (1419-1386), son of Amenhotep II, states that he was not the legitimate successor to the throne, which supports the death of Amenhotep II's firstborn son in the plagues.

Shortly after 1446 BC, Amenhotep IV (1350-1334), great-grandson of Amenhotep II, took the name Akhenaten, built a new capital, and declared that just a single deity should be worshipped. This deity was the sun disc Aten, which was depicted with its rays extended like arms giving life, peace, and equality to all. It is not so unusual that a people who had been powerfully impacted by the one true God of Moses would try to worship the God that had so convincingly defeated their gods. An increasing body of evidence indicates that this cult of Aten had its beginning in the reign of Thutmose IV, son of Amenhotep II, Pharaoh of the exodus.

The Pharaohs of the Exodus Listing

Second Intermediate Period (1782-1570 BC): Period of Hyksos rule.

New Kingdom (1570-1070 BC): Period of imperial supremacy.

Ahmose I (1570-1546 BC; 1st Pharaoh of 18th dynasty): Expelled the Hyksos and re-established native Egyptian rule.

Amenhotep I (1551-1524 BC; 2nd Pharaoh of 18th dynasty): Military campaigns in Kush, Nubia and possibly Libya.

Thutmose I (1524-1518 BC; 3rd Pharaoh of 18th dynasty): Practiced genocide on Hebrew male babies (Exod. 1:15-22).

Tuthmosis II (1518-1504 BC; 4th Pharaoh of 18th dynasty): Married to half sister Hatshepsut, they reigned together for around 14 years.

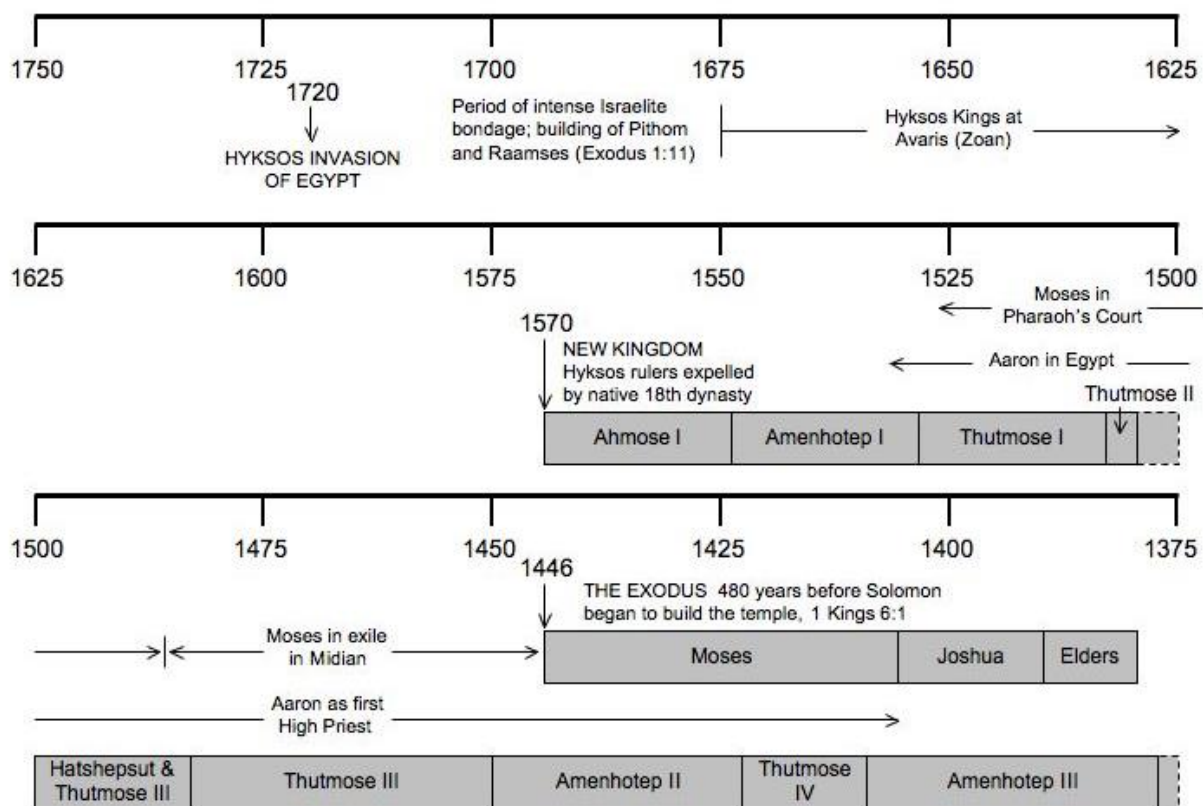
Hatshepsut (1498-1483 BC; 5th Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty): The “female Pharaoh” who “usurped” Thutmose III. This could have been the daughter of Thutmose I, who drew Moses out of the Nile and later ruled as queen (Ex. 2:5).

Thutmose III (1504-1450 BC; 6th Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty): Became Pharaoh as a young child. His stepmother Hatshepsut acted as regent for the young king. After her death he finally became ruler in his own right. Pharaoh of the oppression who tried to kill Moses and from whom Moses fled into Midian (Ex. 2:15).

Amenhotep II (1453-1419 BC; 7th Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty): Pharaoh of the plagues and the exodus (Ex. 3:10-15:19).

Tuthmosis IV (1419-1386 BC; 8th Pharaoh of 18th dynasty): Restored the Great Sphinx of Giza and carved the “Dream Stele” (stone tablet containing his dream) between its paws.

Chronology Chart of the Exodus⁶



⁶ Chart was taken from Jon Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt*, p. 14; revised by Cory Baugher.